

## An aside on sleaze

What do I mean by sleazy? I'll offer a working definition here and return to the question in conclusion. Sleazy in current usage refers to something which is disgusting, filthy, nasty; that is it has the connotation of "low" culturally and morally. In current British usage it is often used in discussions of politics to refer to politicians compromised by payoffs, graft, or mercenary actions over riding law, principle, or the common good. And everywhere sit is often present in making distinctions about sexual matters: sleazy means sexually promiscuous, sexually active without distinction (understanding distinction as a class and cultural term, as in Bourdieu).

In an earlier essay, "Taking out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody," I distinguished a tendency in popular commercial art which I called self-aware kitsch which is filled with parodic clichés and depends on exaggerating and underlining, thus setting up a camp response, as in the heightened bedroom-and-boardroom TV series *Dynasty*. Following Sontag's discussion of camp and significant gay/queer critical elaborations, high camp can be seen as a strategy for ironic comically reading the highly aestheticized (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, the typical staging of Verdi operas, Cole Porter lyrics, etc.) while low camp, or trash, can be a strategy for celebrating the debased (early John Waters films, George Kuchar, Curt McDowell).

Sleaze, then, is used pejoratively, judgmentally, and depends on making cultural distinction. Essentially ironic, it depends on looking down on something. In the case of the work that I'm considering here, there is a strong sense that the work is crass, that it is not sincere, but is adopting whatever ethical and moral stance it has simply to exploit its subject. The classic examples can be scenes of slave trading in *Mondo Freudo* and *Mondo Bizarro*. These fake documentaries purport to show auctioning (mostly) women in Mexico and Lebanon. The scenes are patently staged ("Lebanon" is a well known Los Angeles area location, Bronson Canyon), and the slaves are disrobed, to display female breasts, but genitals are obscured with scratched on censor bars, thus implying that the female pubic area (viewed in a distant telephoto image) is more shocking than trading in humans. The filmmakers' moral/ethical stance is obviously questionable in that they simply record, and do not intervene either in the moment of the sale, nor do they provide their cinematography as evidence to the police or other authorities, nor do they publicize what is going on to the press or social and political organizations. *Mondo Bizarro* actually goes so far as to have an extended sequence showing the camera crew's heroic efforts to move their heavy equipment, using a block and tackle and sledge to a hilltop for secret telephoto filming. Clearly the aim of the slave trading sections is not justice or human sympathy for victims, but simply showing something sensational, titillating, and with a pompous voice-over narration, making a feeble attempt to justify it as information. With sleaze, the joke, the demeaning part, is on the audience.